

## Reaching I-Don't-Care and Underachieving Students



By now I hope you've had some success building relationships with your most challenging students. Only a minute or so a few times a week works wonders. An unexpected "thanks for taking care of that", a word of encouragement about improved effort, a non-academic comment, or short conversation at an off time eventually breaks down fear. Fear is the underlying cause of most negative attitudes. It could be fear of failure, of being mocked/bullied. It could even be fear of success! Remember that these challenging students would rather look bad than smart; or bad rather than stupid. They come to school in a suit of armor. That armor serves many purposes:



*If I care and fail, it hurts more.*

*I don't feel valued, so why should I care?*

*I cared before, and was disappointed. They won't trick me again!*

*If I use this armor often enough, they'll give up eventually and leave me alone.*

Techniques that we have been using with I-Don't-Care children may not have worked. We say there's no time to try something new. However, if other strategies haven't worked, we can't afford **not** to take time to try some new intervention, even though the results won't be immediate.

Unowned behavior is never changed. MaryAnn Brittingham (Bureau of Education and Research) offers this advice called "Putting the Game on the Table". I-Don't-Care and underachieving students must eventually own up to their behavior and be responsible. She suggests putting an index card (or large sticky note) on the child's desk. Mark two columns for the idea you're working on (e.g. completing homework). Label one column *Remembered to...* and the other *Forgot to...* Each day put a tally mark in the proper column as the child looks on. No praise, reward, judgment, just the mark. Next week give the card or sticky to the child and let her place tally marks. You can keep your own tally and compare at the end of the week. That might bring an unconscious behavior to a conscious level and create a

win-win situation. (Incidentally, you can sign up for Mary Ann's newsletter on discipline at: [MaryAnn@mbrittingham.com](mailto:MaryAnn@mbrittingham.com))

In the last issue we talked about using fill-ins on study guides or on power points. Most study guides do all the work for the class. Most power point slides contain all the information. Some teachers say, "Copy these notes, then we'll talk about them". That is mind-numbing for students, especially those who struggle or don't care in the first place. Not only that, it's backwards! Instead begin with a hook-and-hold: a story relating to the topic, an enticing question to get discussion started, set the scene, show a video clip, sing or play a song. Then when the material begins to make sense, have the students take some notes or read from the text. If you sprinkle fill-ins through the guide or power point, the subliminal message is that the child must do some of the work.

As the attitude improves with time, we exhale and silently say, "Finally!" Then the bottom falls out and the improvement may relapse. Don't change your plan, just add a support for a *limited* time until the child gets back on track. For example, "I've noticed that you're having trouble doing your homework again. How can I help you get started?" Asking a child, "Why do you do this?" often gives you the shoulder shrug or "I don't know", so be specific. Say something like, "Here's what I'm noticing. You rush to get your work done. Do you see it too? I'm wondering if it's because you're afraid you'll have to miss recess in order to finish it. What are your thoughts?"

Be specific with your words of encouragement as well. These students can sniff out phoniness in a heartbeat. They think we're trying to bribe them so that they will do the work. This cements their negativity, and they go on strike! Mentally they could be saying, "You think that'll work with me? I'll show you!" So rather than *nice job* try *much better number formation* or *you stayed focused longer today*. If saying these things makes you feel phony or uncomfortable, make up a set of cards with assorted comments on them. Place them on desks as the occasion arises.

Daniel Pink notes in *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* that rewards, consequences and contracts work against us with these students. He is convinced that "we are raising externally motivated kids". In their minds they say, "I'll do it only if you give me something for it." These incentives are band aids which do not heal the wound. What's the wound? Fear!

Fear is \_\_\_\_\_ than any \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_.  
(greater) (reward) (consequence)

Some I-Don't-Care or underachieving children ask many questions. They want to convince us that they can't do the work, don't understand, or just want to waste our teaching time even before directions are given or the lesson is taught. Try sticky notes for that type of child also. Put 5 on his desk. Every time he asks a question he removes one note. The remaining notes equate to something positive: time on computer, extra snack time etc. He could also write key words about questions he has. As you teach, he crosses off the question you've just answered. At the end of the lesson he may ask the *one* most important question remaining on the card or sticky. (This also requires decision making.) For discipline you can also put a sticky on a desk when you note misbehavior. Don't comment, just move on. If you notice that the misbehavior continues, place another sticky. Three strikes...you're out! That means you impose a consequence. However, if the behavior improves, remove a note (or maybe two). This lets the child know that you see the positive as well as the negative.

*Remember: Don't blame the lettuce!*

You change behavior with \_\_\_\_\_, not \_\_\_\_\_.  
(compassion) (judgment)